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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001852

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA FRONT OFFICE AND NEA/ELA; NSC FOR  
ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/24/2027

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: LAF COMMANDER SLEIMAN WANTS NEW  
LANGUAGE, BEHAVIOR IN PRESIDENCY

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Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) In a 11/24 one-on-one meeting with the Ambassador, Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman said all the right things: he and the army would respect and recognize the Siniora cabinet until Lebanon's next president is chosen, the army would strive to maintain security and stability, and -- if he is elected president himself -- he will work to change both the language and behavior of the presidency. Criticizing the just-ended Emile Lahoud presidency, he agreed that Lebanon's president must work hand-in-hand with the prime minister and cabinet. He said that, while disarming Hizballah required a political process, he would see that a credible army commander and credible officers would be chosen committed to implementing UNSCR 1701. End summary.

LAF WILL RESPECT SINIORA CABINET

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¶2. (C) At the conclusion of a larger meeting on 11/24 that included aides and notetakers, the Ambassador asked to see LAF Commander Michel Sleiman one-on-one. The Ambassador noted that, with the expiration of President Emile Lahoud's term the previous evening with no successor elected, people were questioning Sleiman's intentions. Assuming the Ambassador was raising topics discussed first in the larger session, Sleiman repeated his earlier vow that the LAF would respect and recognize the Siniora cabinet as the constitutional authority holding the powers of the presidency ad interim. Emile Lahoud's outgoing letter, which was not a declaration of a state of emergency, to the army did not change anything on the ground. Moreover, as demonstrated by the heavy deployment of the LAF in and around Beirut, Sleiman and the LAF were committed to maintaining security and stability.

CLAIMING NOT TO BE SYRIA'S CANDIDATE

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¶3. (C) The Ambassador specified that he was hearing people mentioning Sleiman's name again as a presidential candidate, a problematic development if that meant the victory of Hizballah and Syria over the democratic majority. Sleiman

acknowledged that his name was circulating again, but he denied promoting himself. "I know what the presidency means; why would I want the headache?" He noted the requirement for a constitutional amendment (to overcome a two-year cooling-off period) had thwarted Central Bank Governor Salameh's candidacy, and he assumed it would do the same for him. But if two-thirds of the MPs want him (the number required to amend the constitution), then of course he was willing to serve.

¶4. (C) But, Sleiman said, "I am not Syria's candidate; you must know that." While he has maintained some channels of communication to Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, he claimed that much of the Syrian apparatus, including Rustom Ghazaleh and Assaf Shawkat, "is against me." Citing his defiance of the Hizballah "red lines" against entering the Nahr al-Barid camp, Sleiman also claimed that Hizballah's alleged support of him is lukewarm at best. The Ambassador noted that Hassan Nasrallah's 11/11 speech seemed to be a tailor-made campaign speech thanking and promoting Sleiman, and Hizballah has assembled its arsenal while Sleiman was in charge of the LAF. These factors naturally concern us. Expressing some impatience, Sleiman again denied that he has the support of Hizballah. (UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon Geir Pedersen told us on 11/24 that his Hizballah contacts at least told him that they rejected a Sleiman candidacy.)

ADVOCATING "NEW LANGUAGE AND NEW BEHAVIOR"  
FOR THE NEW PRESIDENT  
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¶5. (C) The Ambassador noted that the international community would have certain expectations of the new Lebanese president. There could be no continuation of the policies and attitudes of the Lahoud years. Sleiman readily agreed. The new president must have "new language and new behavior,"

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compared to Lahoud, whom Sleiman described in terms not normally seen in cable traffic. Unlike Lahoud, the new president must work in partnership with the cabinet the the prime minister.

HIZBALLAH'S ARMS: NO PLAN,  
BUT COMMITMENT TO UNSCR 1701  
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¶6. (C) The Ambassador asked about Hizballah's arms, our primary concern and an issue that keeps Lebanon at risk. Sleiman said that it would be unreasonable of the international community to expect the new president and the new cabinet to disarm Hizballah by force. "Don't ask me to take 30,000 rockets by force; I would be lying to you if I said I could do it." There needs to be a credible political process to wean Hizballah from its militia. But, the Ambassador noted, part of the problem is that Hizballah continues to smuggle arms; at least the new president and cabinet need to prevent the Hizballah problem from getting worse. Agreeing, Sleiman said that having better relations with Syria (possible under a new cabinet, he argued) would help, but so would selecting the right people for army command positions. In an implicit (and probably unintentional) swipe at Military Intelligence (G-2) Chief Georges Khoury, Sleiman said that the new president would have to work to see that a credible G-2 chief was appointed. If he were elected president, Sleiman vowed to do all that he could to support the implementation of UNSCR 1701.

COMMENT  
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¶7. (C) Given multiple visitors, surges in mil-mil assistance and cooperative programs, and the Nahr al-Barid fight, we have seen much of Sleiman in recent months. Undoubtedly at this point, he must find our questions and concerns fairly predictable. What we can say, however, is

that practice makes perfect: having rehearsed his lines on us before, he is certainly sounding better and knows in general what we wish to hear. (We also note that it is far easier speaking to Sleiman, who at least stops to listen, than to, say, another presidential hopeful, Michel Edde, who does not.) At this point, if the choice of Lebanon's presidency would come down to Michel Aoun or Michel Sleiman, we'd quietly root on Sleiman in hopes that his practice would more closely approximate his words to us.

FELTMAN